



## "Her wee hands..."

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Her wee hands, curving away from the straps that held them, might have been mittens pinned to a clothes line by a slattern. Or by anybody careless about laundry hung in public. But the plum polish on nails bitten below the quick gave her tiny hands a womanly look and made Romen think <sup>the girl</sup> ~~she herself~~ was the slattern—the one with no regard for what people might think.

He was next. And ready too, in spite of the little hands and in spite of the mewing in her throat. He stood near the headboard aware of Theo's grunting and his head bobbing above the girl's face which was turned to the wall and partially hidden beneath hair undone by writhing..

<sup>to them</sup>  
She came so there and solved all their problems: mice, embarrassing dreams, blocked drains, outrageous ancestry and the simplest and cheapest way to clean diamonds. She was never able, however, to crack the silence and the two women who had not spoken more than the purely perfunctory and absolutely necessary in twenty years continued their mute argument as though the operation of their lungs depended on it.

The day she came was novel for that part of the state—cold and scratchy. Chafing winds depressed the temperature and the sun was helpless to move thermometers more than a few degrees above freezing. The houses on Post Road were recently built so, handsome as the landscaping was, trees and shrubbery, young and unaccustomed to such weather, protected no one from icy licks of wind. Dogwood and palmetto arched to breaking. Patches of ice gleamed then disappeared in the early evening shadow causing the sidewalks she marched along to undermine even the most agile tread. She should have bent her head and closed her eyes to stifle in that

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weather, but being a stranger, she stared wide-eyed at each house searching for the address that matched the one in the advertisement. 1 Old Post Road. No house on the street had a single digit number. Finally, her knees and thighs stinging from the cold that her mini skirt exposed them to, she turned into a driveway where an elderly man tipped the seam from a sack of lee-off.

"You sure?" he asked when she told him the address.

She glanced at the square of paper and nodded.

He scanned her legs, marveled at the height of her boot heels, the cut of her short leather

2. Yet then looked carefully at her face. "Cosy women," he said. "That's their place. It ain't been much for a long time now. But you can't tell them that. Can't tell them nothing.

to them  
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She did not push it and he was not wrong. The house was graceful, imposing, and its

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"Then you're lost," said the woman and slammed the door.

"You sure?" he asked when she told him the address. "1 Old Post Road?"

She glanced at the square of paper and nodded. "1 Old Post Road?"

He scanned her legs, marveled at the height of her boot heels, the cut of her short leather jacket then looked carefully at her face. "Cosey women," he said. "That's their place. It ain't been number one for a long time now. But you can't tell them that. Can't tell them nothing. It's 1410 or 1401, probably."

Now it was her turn to question his certainty. "1 Old Post Road?"

"I'm telling you," he said. The wind, probably, irritating him. "Go on up that a way. You can't miss it 'less you try to. Big as a church."

She thanked him but did not turn around when he hollered at her back, "Or a jail house."

She did not miss it and he was not wrong. The house was graceful, imposing, and its peaked third story roof did suggest a chapel. On either side of the walkway old trees met the blasting wind with the carelessness that came with a century of triumph.

Seeing no bell, she started to knock, but hesitated when she noticed a brightly lit window below, to the right of the porch. It had the look of what was called a garden apartment by some-by others a basement one. She went back down the wooden steps, followed the curve marked by half-buried pieces of slates and descended a flight of iron stairs leading past the window to a door. Pausing at the pane she saw a seated woman. On the table before her were a

colander, newspaper and a mixing bowl. The girl tapped on the window and smiled when the woman looked up. She rose slowly but once on her feet, moved rapidly to the door.

"What is it?" The door opened just wide enough to expose one gray eye.

"I came about the job," said the girl. A marine odor hovered in the crack.

"Then you're lost," said the woman and slammed the door.

The girl banged on it, shouting, " But it says 1 Post Road!. 1 Post Road!"

There was no answer so she went back to the window and pecked the glass with the nails of her left hand while her right pressed the tiny square of newsprint toward the light..

The woman came back to the window, her eyes flat with annoyance as she stared at the girl, then moved her eyes from the young face and its pleading smile to the piece of paper. She squinted at it, looked again at the face then back at the paper, but not before something like panic glinted then died in her eyes. Motioning toward the door she disappeared from the window.

When the girl was inside, the woman offered neither seat nor greeting. She took the advertisement and read. A pencilled circle separated the few lines of one help wanted notice from others above and below.

Companion, secretary sought by elderly woman. Light but highly confidential work.

Apply to Mrs. H. Cosey. 1 Post Road

"Where did you get this?" The woman's voice was calm as a secretary's.

"From the newspaper."

"I can see that. Which? The ~~the~~ Harbor Journal?"

"Yes, Mam."



"When?"

"Yesterday."

She handed back the advertisement. "Well. I guess you better sit down."

"Are you Mrs. H. Cosey?"

She gave the girl a look. "If I was I'd know about that little scrap of paper wouldn't I?"

The girl's laughter was the agitation of bells—a welcoming disruption. "Oh, right.

Sorry." "Let me see that thing again." She wiped her hands on a dish towel before touching the

ad. They both sat and the woman returned to the work of de-veining shrimp. Twelve rings, two on three fingers of each hand snatched light from the ceiling fixture and seemed to elevate task from drudgery to sorcery.

"What's your name, then?"

Ember.  
Ember? You mean Amber, don't you?  
No, Mam. It's Ember.

Toby.  
Ember  
Toby what?  
Ember  
Skye. ~~Toby~~ Skye. With an 'e'.

You from around here?  
Used to be. I've been away.

"Who're your people? I never heard tell of any family name Skye."

"They're not from here."

"Where, then?"

The jacket leather purred as the girl shrugged her shoulders and reached across the table to the colander.

"Can I help you with that? She asked. "I'm a pretty fair cook."

"No. Needs a certain rhythm."

A bouquet of steam wandered away from water lifting to a boil on the stove. Behind the woman was a wall of cupboards, their surfaces as pale and handled as pastry. The silence stretching between the two began to pulse. The girl fidgeted. "Is Mrs. Cosey here?"

"She is."

"May I speak to her?"

"Let me see that thing again." She wiped her hands on a dishtowel before touching the ad. "'Highly confidential,' huh?" She pursed her lips. "I believe that. I sure do," she said and dropped the paper with thumb and forefinger as though depositing a diaper into a soak pail. She wiped her hands again and selected a shrimp. There, just there, beneath the lucent flesh she held in her fingers crept a dark and tender line. Deft as a jeweler she removed it.

"Can I see Mrs. Cosey now?"

"I guess. Sure. Up those stairs, then some more stairs. Bedroom at the end of the hall."

She motioned toward a flight of stairs leading from an alcove near the stove.

<sup>Ember</sup>  
"Miss Skye? Miss ~~Toby~~ Skye? You not interested in my name?"

<sup>Ember</sup>  
~~Toby~~ turned back, her grin a study in embarrassment and muddle. "Oh, yes, mam. I am. I'm just so nervous."

"Christina. If you get the job you'll need to know it."

"I hope so. Nice meeting you, Christina. Really. Second floor you said?"

Her boots were loud on the stairs. Christina glanced at the warming light on the rice steamer. Gathering the shrimp shells she plopped them into the ~~pot of~~ boiling water and adjusted the flame. Returning to the table she picked up a garlic paw and, enjoying as always her



Ember's  
bedizened hands, peeled away tissue from two of the cloves. These she diced and left on the cutting board. The old Philco refrigerator hummed and wavered a little. Christina gave it an encouraging pat before bending to a bottom cabinet thinking, what's she up to now? Must be scared or fixing to make a move. What, though? And how did she manage to get a notice in the paper without me knowing? She took out a silver tureen with a fitted glass bowl, sighing at the stubborn tarnish in the crevices of the C's on its cover. Like all the carved letters in the house, the double C's went beyond ornate to illegible. Even on the handle of the spoon in her apron pocket, its initials, once hooked together for life, were hardly a trace. It was tiny, a toddler's first spoon, but Christina ate every meal she could with it just to hold close the child it was given to, and hold also the pictures it summoned <sup>at will</sup>. How she had scooped peach slices with it from home made ice cream, helpless in the thrill <sup>looming</sup>, the slide between her lips, never minding the grains of sand blowing over the dessert—the whole picnic lunch for that matter.

Soaping and rinsing the glass bowl Christina's thoughts skittered from beach picnics to Silver Dip, salt-spiced air to Q-tips on to the interview being held in the bedroom of the meanest woman on the coast. While sitting across from the lying Miss Skye, Christina had set her own body of fifty years ago next to the girl's and won. Miss <sup>Ember</sup> ~~Toby~~ Skye had good legs (well, knees and thighs were all she could see in those tall boots) and a white woman's narrow behind that was all the rage these days. But nothing to rival her own self in the forties when the beach was the color of cream but glittery and the sucking waves reached out from water so blue you had to turn away lest it hurt your eyes. Nothing to rival that self, the one that walked inside. It was the face that struck gongs of envy. That and the Amazon hair. At first Christina had stared at her, then, rattled, concentrated on the newspaper clipping. The shrimp work gave her ample reason to sustain a lowered gaze because she did not like the heart jump that came when she looked in

fifteen/2



Ember's

~~Toby's~~ lying eyes. Clear, they were, and still, too still. And full of--what? What was that?

Yearning? Trust? There was something frail under those double lashes. Like the unnerving look of a beautiful, under fed child. One you wanted to slap for being needy and kiss for being perfect.

Christina stirred the garlic into butter softening in a skillet. After a moment she added the shrimp then set about making the roux. She drained a little stock to loosen the paste, whisking it smooth. "I'm a pretty fair cook," is what <sup>that Ember</sup> ~~the Toby~~ girl had said, all the while reaching with dirty <sup>and sooty nails</sup> hands for the bowl of cleaned shrimp. And "Used to be" from around here she'd said, while sitting in front of the best known woman in the county, a woman who knew every black ever

born from Niggerhead Rock to Sackers Point, from Cosey's Rest to Barrington, and half of the ones in Harbor City as well since that was where she had spent (or wasted) twenty years of her

life. <sup>Ember</sup> Skye. ~~Toby~~ Skye. She could have gotten that name from True Confessions except she was too young to have even heard of it. So what was the heart skip for? So afraid she would blush

<sup>Christina had</sup> any moment ~~and~~ sharpened her voice to a razor to cut off the possibility. What did Heed want

her for? How had she got an ad in the newspaper without a telephone? ~~Had~~ <sup>could not have</sup> the yardboy helped her? <sup>he wasn't needed for weeks</sup> Whatever was going on was a trap laid by a high heeled snake. Some new mess. Some

new way to hurt her. Rob her future just as she had stolen away her past.

"I'll be damned," she murmured. "I'll be good and damned before I let her win this one."

Christina spread her fingers for the soothing her diamonds lent. Then she assembled the rice, the shrimp, the sauce, layering each meticulously, artfully in the tureen.. It would remain

warm while she tossed a light salad <sup>then</sup> ~~and~~, in a little while, arrange it all on a silver tray, <sup>and carry</sup> ~~take~~ it up three flights of stairs <sup>there</sup> ~~where~~ it would be ignored by the meanest thing on the coast <sup>who at</sup>

that moment ~~gazed~~ was<sup>s</sup> gazing between raw silk draperies at an astonishing, ~~set~~ sinking sun.